

Ethical dilemmas: Experiences of secondary school teachers in Addis Ababa city, Ethiopia

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Abstract

Being a teacher involves multi-layered ethical challenges and decisions. The purpose of this research was to explore the ethical dilemmas faced by secondary school teachers in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. In addition, the study aimed to explore the ways and approaches to resolving ethical dilemmas. A phenomenological qualitative research approach served as the guiding methodology. Eight participants were involved in the semi-structured in-depth interviews. Data were analyzed by exploring potential themes and sub-themes using thematic analysis. The major ethical dilemmas that emerged from the data include (a) not being governed by schools' rules and regulations (disrespect and dis-rule), (b) not being honest in the position they have, (c) lack of acceptance and recognition among the school community, and (d) being indecisive due to deep personal challenges of students and political interference. The major approaches utilized in addressing ethical challenges were (a) respecting the code of conduct of students' discipline, (b) open discussion and confrontation, (c) understanding causal factors, and (d) being ethical. The need for professional development plans and training based on guiding books have been suggested as means of action in preparing secondary school teachers to deal with ethical challenges and to help them be good at decision-making.

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Introduction

The ethical element in the teaching profession has become a key theme in the education sector (Campbell, 2008; Ehrich et al., 2011; Maxwell, 2017; Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011). Justice, truthfulness, care, honesty, integrity, and professionalism are deemed characteristics of ethical behavior, and are central to teachers' professional decision-making (Kuther, 2003; Oser, 1991). The teacher-student relationship is one of the dominant teaching contexts where interactions with students define the value of the teaching profession i.e. to work for best interest of students. Shapira-Lishchinsky (2011) indicates that caring for others (e.g., pupils, colleagues) is one of the most important values that teachers consider when dealing with ethical decisions. Similarly, Ehrich et al. (2011) pointed out that teachers are

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moral agents who operate in relationships with others (such as students, parents and other teachers).

Ethics in the teaching profession is highly linked with moral issues where personal preferences as well as social responsibilities put into effect in the process of cultivation of a good citizenship (Campbell, 2008; Ehrich et al., 2011). A set of personal standards can emanate from the individual self, and teaching practices can be considered as opportunities to realize those possibilities. Campbell (2008) reported that the teaching profession involves mainly caring elements towards students and colleagues, and this situation may lead to moral conflicts while professionals struggle to see the right ways of the decision-making process. There is a tendency to consider learning from the environment about moral values as assets to be a moral person. Being ethical is inseparable from being a moral person. Though there are different approaches to ethical values in teaching, the virtue-based approach of ethics in education provides emphasis for the teacher's personal and interpersonal traits which are responsible in relation to the development of students' personal and moral values (Sabbagh, 2009).

The new characteristics of the globalized world and its accelerated process of modernization have caused society to face situations in terms of how to behave and act (Gluchmanova, 2015). Like other educators around the world, African educators are facing with new challenges of balancing local, national, and global norms and moral as well as ethical values in the process of educating students (Tessema, 2021).

Historically, Ethiopia has been known as a nation with lots of wisdoms and acceptable social norms that can serve as foundations for ethical values and morality. In Ethiopia, indigenous ethical principles such as "living with others", traditional indigenous religions, indigenous political structures, and religious customs play a major role for the majority of the people to be ethical and live with moral values (Tessema, 2021). For instance, the act of looking after children of one's neighbors can be mentioned as one good example of acceptable social norm that could affect a person's moral judgment. Such kind of relationships may be seen differently in different contexts. Thus, moral judgment context is different for different people depending on where you live and whom you interact with and all these could be a potential source of ethical dilemmas during decision-making process (Miljeteig et al., 2019).

Teachers face ethical dilemmas in the course of their daily work. These ethical dilemmas often involve students' personal factors, relationship with students and other stakeholders, family agenda, confidentiality, student safety, issues of diversity, obeying school rules, organizational structure, and public interest (Ehrich et al., 2011; Karacan & Aracı, 2019; Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011). Ethiopian school teachers face typical ethical challenges due to financial constraints, poor work environment, lack of guidance and education on professional ethics, negative attitude towards teaching profession, and school policy and its implementation (Ayenalem et al., 2023; Mohammed, 2020; Shishigu, 2015; Shishigu et al., 2017). School teachers may use different approaches to deal with those ethical dilemmas although ethical dilemmas may not have any clear-cut resolution and are likely to be highly challenging.

School teachers need to be better prepared to provide a response for the need of the society at large at school environment and to fulfill the needs of students. Providing trainings for school teachers, staffs and parents on the priority areas of school concerns and providing support for teachers through professional development plans can be helpful in handling ethical dilemmas and in the better management of misunderstandings (Ehrich et al., 2011; Maxwell, 2017; Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2009).

Different approaches to ethical dilemmas suggest that the materials or resources used for educational programs and personal development opportunities need to be prepared by using specific dilemmas that are perceived as relevant and context-appropriate (Miljeteig et al., 2019). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the ethical dilemmas faced by secondary school teachers and ways of approaches in resolving the ethical dilemmas. This study can contribute significant inputs for designing proper level of ethics trainings and professional development plan for school teachers as the study is conducted specifically in the school setting. This study is also original in its use of a phenomenological qualitative approach to get in-depth understandings of ethical dilemmas in secondary schools of Addis Ababa city. The study serves the purpose of obtaining an insight for future related research.

Statement of the Problem

Empirical research on ethical dilemmas in Ethiopian context is quite limited and the existing studies on teachers' ethics practice have been conducted to identify causes of teachers' professional mis-conduct (Ayenalem et al., 2023), to examine implementation level of teachers' code of ethics (Ayenalem et al., 2022; Mohammed, 2020), and to identify gaps for teacher education training programs (Shishigu et al., 2017). The analysis from those studies indicates that there is a research gap that specifically answers the questions on what are the most persistent ethical dilemmas of secondary school teachers and how teachers respond the ethical dilemmas in their work for proper development of professional needs in school environment.

Most studies (e.g. Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2009) indicate that teachers lack adequate professional development skills to deal with ethical challenges that are faced in daily work life. In the context of Ethiopia, similar to many other countries, school teachers may not be in a position to respond properly for school challenges and ethical dilemmas at school due to lack of awareness and less training in ethics education and professionalism during teachers' preparation program and at school settings (Ayenalem et al., 2023; Boon, 2011; Caropreso & Weese, 2005; Shishigu et al., 2017). The importance of ethics in teaching profession has been the focus in order to achieve positive productivity or to minimize negative consequences (Ehrich et al., 2011; Gluchmanova, 2015) and to increase public trust (Maxwell, 2017). Thus, it is worthwhile to study the ethical challenges of school teachers and ways to resolve such challenges for producing proper interventions and to make the school system better functioning.

This study is guided by the following questions: (1) what are the prominent ethical dilemmas faced by secondary school teachers? (2) How do secondary school teachers approach ethical dilemmas to solve them?

Theoretical Framework

Ethical dilemma emerges when people find themselves in confounding situations that require them to choose among competing sets of principles, values, or beliefs (Cranston et al., 2006). Typically, an ethical dilemma is not a choice between right and wrong. It is a choice between “right” and “right” options (Kidder, 1995). Ethical dilemmas for teachers often emerge when there is a difficult tendency to make choices due to conflict between formal organizational requirements and their personal/professional values (Campbell, 1997; Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2009).

Shapira-Lishchinsky (2011) identified five categories of ethical incidents and dilemma that teachers deal with. These are caring climate versus formal climate; distributive justice versus school standards; confidentiality versus school rules; loyalty to colleagues versus school norms; and family agenda versus educational standards. She further indicated that caring climate versus formal climate was the most frequently discussed category whereby the teacher’s dilemma lies in choosing between personal needs and obeying school rules regarding teacher-student relationship.

School teachers should be better prepared to respond to the challenges of school environment through professional development approaches that take into account the ethical complexity of school-based management (Ehrich et al., 2011). It is important to develop teachers’ awareness and urge to use decision making skills and process for better practice of moral teaching. Among many other decision-making models, Kitchener (1985) presented a model of ethical decision making that incorporates five principles. As Kitchener stated, ethical principles are general, abstract, and fundamental than ethical code. Consequently, these ethical principles have been a foundation to develop code of ethics for helping professions in general, including teaching. The five guiding principles are respecting autonomy, doing no harm, benefiting others, being just, and being faithful. These principles can provide an excellent framework for school teachers when struggling with ethical decision making.

Similarly, Ehrich et al. (2011) has developed an ethical decision-making model that helps to understand teacher practice from real life problems faced by teachers in Queensland (Australian) schools. The five interdependent parts of the model are critical incident, a set of competing forces, personal values, the choice, and the action that impact the individual, employing organization and the community. The competing factors are mentioned and it includes professional ethics, legal issues or policies, organizational culture, the institutional context, the public interest, society and community, the global context, the political framework, economic and financial contexts, and the untitled force; this signifies an important but as yet unidentified force. In the same study, Ehrich et al. (2011) performed analysis of three ethical dilemmas that are faced by teachers using the developed model. The analysis indicated that particular types of school structures and power arrangements facilitate or inhibit teachers’ ability to make decisions. This implies that organizational climate and rules are the ones that may influence teachers’ decision in dealing with ethical dilemmas.

Methods

Research Approach

A phenomenology qualitative research methodology was guiding the study because it deals with understanding phenomena from the point of view of participants (Merriam, 2009). In this study, semi-structured in-depth interviews were employed as main data collection instruments because they have the advantage of collecting large amounts of data about participants' perspectives relatively quickly and permit immediate follow-up and clarification of issues if required. They also enable researchers to understand the experience of others and the meanings they attach to their own experiences (Seidman, 2006).

Participants

Eight participants were selected using purposive sampling method from two public secondary schools (four from each school) in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Five male and three female participants were chosen based on recommendations from school coordinators, and they were initially contacted before the interview date. The age of participants was within the range of 33 to 54 years. They have long years of school services, specifically in teaching (from 12 to 26 years) and in administration (from 2 years of experiences to 12 years). Seven of the participants were master's degree holders in different specialties, such as history, civics, languages, mathematics, biology, and chemistry. All the participants did not take any specific training on ethical dilemmas. However, three of the participants had related trainings on how to manage students' behaviors in school and they have got a sense that students' context and background need to be considered while making decisions related to students' concerns and problems.

Data Gathering

To explore experiences of secondary school teachers regarding ethical dilemmas and to find out the ways and approaches in resolving the ethical dilemmas, in-depth interview guiding questions have been used. Each interview lasted approximately 25 to 30 minutes. The interview guiding questions were open ended in nature. There were two parts for interview guide. The first part gathered responses for personal information of participants like age, gender, years of services, educational status, subject areas, and one question that was asked whether participants did take any training regarding ethical dilemma. The second part elicited detailed experiences of the participants in relation to ethical dilemmas.

The guiding questions were: what is the type and nature of ethical dilemmas faced by secondary school teachers? could you mention any type of dilemma you have faced during your course offering (or schooling time)? what was the most difficult professional ethical decision faced by secondary school teachers? (Prompting: students miss behaviors, confidentiality, parental rights etc.), do you think any professional dilemma which out weight the others, how did you approach ethical dilemmas to solve them? and what does it mean to deal with teachers' ethical dilemmas for you? Probes and follow up questions were included to get better details of response about the participants' experiences of ethical dilemmas and how they were approached. Trustworthiness of the methodology had increased by using

verbatim language of participants and the physical presence of the researcher as facilitator during data collection (Merriam, 2009).

As far as the data gathering procedure is concerned, the two secondary schools were selected by considering nearness for follow up. Following the selection of the site of the study, respective school directors were asked for permission and were informed about the study. At the inception of data collection, the consent of participants was asked and the purpose of the study was explained for participants. In addition, they were given orientation regarding important procedures of the study, including the time that may require for conducting the interview and were told that they can leave anytime during the interview. The nature of the study was likely to yield sensitive and confidential information. The research participants were reassured that their experiences were treated with utmost confidentiality and their anonymity and the school's anonymity were kept. Informed consent was requested to get their willingness, including audio recording of interviews.

The data was collected by two research assistants who were graduate students in counseling psychology from school of psychology, Addis Ababa University. They participated in conducting the interview and transcribing the audio record data that was collected using in-depth interviews. In addition, the two research assistants filled out post-study reflection tool in order to get dominant themes and any emotional challenges during the interview process. This process helps to ensure the rigor of qualitative research and to manage ethical consideration that can arise during data collection process (Palaganas et al., 2017; Patkin, 2020). The guiding questions were prepared first in English and then they were translated in to Amharic for convenience of data collection. Training was given to the research assistants on how to conduct the interview and transcribe those data.

Data Analysis

A qualitative method was employed to analyze the data and to explore possible themes. The data was prepared first by transcribing the entire audiotape interviews and this had helped to understand the participant on a deeper level (Seidman, 2006). Transcribing the entire interview tape was also useful to explore the process from the participant narratives, and then to assure its objectivity.

In addition to objective data, the researcher's subjective consciousness experiences during reading the transcripts and selecting the interest and emerging possible themes could have imposed the understanding and getting the meaning of the phenomena to be studied. In addition, post-study reflections of the two research assistants were compared to increase the trustworthiness of data analysis. Possible themes and sub-themes were emerged using thematic analysis technique. Possible interpretations and discussions were made based on the review of what has been discussed so far about ethical dilemmas faced by secondary school teachers. Finally, implications for further studies were explored.

Results

Several themes emerged from the data during the analysis. The themes are grouped and presented in this section based on the guiding research questions. The major categories of themes for ethical dilemmas were (a) not governed by schools' rules and regulations (disrespect and dis-rule), (b) not being honest to the position they have, (c) lack of acceptance and recognition among school community, and (d) being indecisive due to deep personal challenges of students and political interference. And, the major categories of themes for approaching ethical dilemmas to solve were (a) respecting the code of conduct of students' discipline, (b) open discussion and confrontation, (c) understanding causal factors, and (d) being ethical.

Prominent Ethical Dilemmas Faced by Secondary School Teachers

Under this section several themes were explored from the collected data during analysis. The major themes were (a) not governed by schools' rules and regulations (disrespect and dis-rule), (b) not being honest to the position they have, (c) lack of acceptance and recognition among school community, and (d) being indecisive due to deep personal challenges of students and political interference.

Not Governed by Schools' Rules and Regulations (Disrespect and Dis-rule)

Most participants replied that secondary school teachers faced students' disciplinary behaviors and they felt that teachers are becoming unrespected entities in the school environment. One of the participants (Interviewee 02 from school 2/S-2-2, 26 May 2021) specifically replied,

I came across students whom I don't teach while going to class, I would pass ignoring whatever activities they are involved in. I am doing this because I wanted to avoid harsh responses that would come from angry students by any of my comments. Not wearing their uniform is one thing that we usually ignore even if we observe. Trying to have dialogue with such students outside classroom on the topic of not properly wearing uniforms might yield unfavorable response and quarrel. Therefore, failure to decide whether to ask or not to ask is my dilemma.

Another participant added the following statement as one of the most difficult professional ethical decision making challenges. It reads,

A student prompted disrespect towards a teacher, influencing the entire class to follow suit. Despite the teacher's efforts to manage the situation, the student persisted, resulting in an investigation by the school discipline committee. The committee decided on expulsion. However, before implementing the decision, the decision-maker opted to offer the student a chance for redemption. The student was given the opportunity to apologize to the teacher publicly and express regret to the entire student body. Despite complying with the latter, the student refused to apologize to

the teacher, leading to the enforcement of a one-year dismissal from school (Interviewee 01 from school 1/S-1-1, 26 May 2021).

The above statements highlight that secondary school teachers often confront complex ethical dilemmas, especially regarding students' disciplinary issues, which are considered among the most challenging they encounter. These dilemmas are implied to be a frequent occurrence, potentially arising on a daily basis as teachers strive to fulfill their duties within the school environment. Moreover, there's an indication of a prevalent feeling of disrespect toward teachers from students, adding another layer of difficulty to managing disciplinary matters. This underscores the significant ethical challenge faced by secondary school educators, particularly in addressing feelings of disrespect, while maintaining a positive and respectful learning environment.

Not Being Honest to the Position They Have

The common sub-themes that emerged under this section were missing classes, working outside of school environment, working at other schools for gaining of extra benefits, covering classes on behalf of other colleagues, and inability to produce ethical, educated and well-mannered students.

Covering classes or watching students on behalf of other teachers was one of the ethical challenges that secondary school teachers usually face. Few teachers may decline the request when they are asked for favor quite repeatedly and when they feel it is unjust. Even if they have to offer the favor to their colleagues, the decision comes with a lot of sense of guiltiness knowing that their colleagues are making money out of the school's formal working hours. This kind of situation usually places the teachers under basic question of ethics asking themselves 'is it the right thing to do or not to do?' From the stories of one of the participants (Interviewee 01 from school 2/S-2-1, 26 May 2021), at times some teachers get penalties for being guilty of classes on behalf of other colleagues by way of doing favor and this makes the situation of that teacher even more challenging in terms of ethical dilemma.

Missing classes with an intention of earning additional income from somewhere else was also the other commonly mentioned act of secondary school teachers. One of the participants (S-1-3) mentioned that for most of the secondary school teachers, it has become tough to cover their basic daily expenses with the income they generate by working only for one school. Therefore, they tend to engage themselves to explore some other opportunities to earn more money at the cost of their official working hours in their respective schools. Other opportunities to explore for such fulfillment might include engagement in political activities. Teachers may spend extra time for political activities, and this will create obstacles in the main teaching and learning process. One of the participants (S-1-3) said, "In order to get some benefits I might be involved in some political activities at the cost of the students' time. I do this in order to get financial benefits. This might adversely affect my devotion to teaching and gear my focus onto the benefits".

From the above statements, financial challenge was one of the leading factors for not being honest to the priorities of the job. One teacher may spend hours during the day outside

of school environment and this leads to missing classes and then teachers might be unable to accomplish tasks based on goals. From the interview report sense of guiltiness was explored. This all leads to dilemma of work environment and would result in low efficiency at work environment.

Lack of Acceptance and Recognition among School Community

Teachers at school live with multifaceted motivation issues than ever before. The lack of acceptance in school communities refers to lack of acknowledgment from higher officials and lack of respect from various student groups. The behaviors that are manifested in the school system include insulting and physically assaulting girl students and insulting teachers. These factors can deteriorate school teachers' moral while they are trying to fulfill their responsibilities in the school system.

One of the participants (S-1-1) explained that secondary school teachers are not in a position of empowerment in knowing how to implement school regulations and how to act to make better decisions. It sounds teachers are expected to follow the demands of higher officials, and this leads to mistreatment of teachers as if they are "robots" rather than human beings. And, this participant added,

Whatever I do from the lower level is not acknowledged and approved at the higher level. And, this makes us (teachers) hopeless and we make some decisions at our respective grade levels on our own. When I say we make our own decisions, I don't mean that we take disciplinary measures that could affect academic performance; it is not our mandate to expel students from school (S-1-1).

Another participant said,

There are things that make teachers careless. Most frequently, the final decision is not going to be made. For example, there were students who came drunk to class and I reported this to the director. The students threw a stone on us (teachers), but they were not expelled. So, this creates a gap between the teachers and the administrators because of the implementation of the code of conduct. As the result, we teachers become careless about its implementation (S-1-3).

The above statements suggest that secondary school teachers frequently encounter ethical dilemmas related to decision-making within the school environment. They often feel disempowered and unhappy due to perceived mistreatment. This lack of empowerment and dissatisfaction adversely impacts their motivation to fulfill their responsibilities, consequently affecting the learning environment.

Being Indecisive Due to Deep Personal Challenges of Students and Political Interference

One could learn that teachers at school try to listen attentively to their students and this all causes them to carry the burden of students, and this in turn affects the decision of teachers. The issue can be related to proper grading of students' achievement. One of the participants (S-2-4) mentioned, "I face ethical dilemmas when I see the students' family

background such as their economic level because there are students who have the duty of supporting their family economically while they are still at school. Therefore, I prioritize assessing the potential impacts of my decisions on the student, their family, and the school before taking any action”.

Another participant replied that there are many difficult ethical dilemmas faced by secondary school teachers in relation to student behaviors. She specifically said,

The occurrence of group misbehaviors such as smoking weed and engaging in fights poses a challenge, as punishing all involved according to the code of conduct would significantly impact many students. Considering the broader implications at the national, familial, and individual levels, immediate expulsion becomes a complex decision. Therefore, while aware of the regulations, final decisions are made only upon observing repeated misconduct, as the ethical dilemma persists in balancing discipline with the potential adverse effects of expulsion (S-1-1).

Political interference was one of the most frequently mentioned challenges of participants in their daily course. In supporting this, one participant (S-1-3) stated, “Teachers who work hard deserve to be encouraged, but due to school politics, those who are involved in different political activities get the encouragement while those who work hard are ignored. This affects the ethical decision-making process and it makes teachers to lose their confidences and motivation to work more, and this all creates a dilemma at the end”. Another participant (S-1-4) added, “Unlike the old times, now a day teaching does not genuinely measure the capacity of the students. There is political interference in our decision. We are not in a position to say that students must only pass according to their potential. These factors always lead me to dilemma (make unable to decide)”.

Ways of Approaches in Resolving the Ethical Dilemmas of Secondary School Teachers

The following themes were explored under this section. The themes were (a) respecting the code of conduct of students’ discipline, (b) open discussion and confrontation, (c) understanding causal factors, and (d) being ethical.

Respecting the Code of Conduct of Students’ Discipline

The interview data revealed that secondary school teachers take steps to deal with ethical dilemmas. One of the measures that may be taken at earlier stage is following the school’s code of conduct that is usually applied for student related discipline. Some teachers try to address some discipline issues by their own before escalating it to school principals.

One of the participants (S-1-2) said, “If I found students who wander around the compound or the corridor during class hours I would give them oral warning for the first time, for this is not appropriate. If I find them doing the same thing again, I get them sign a written warning, and then order them to bring their parents”. Another participant confirmed that:

My students are not beyond my power to be handled ethically. I didn’t face any problem that required other people’s intervention. For instance, when a student faces

academic challenges, I involve their parents in a constructive discussion, a step that students readily adhere to. Similarly, in addressing incomplete homework, I first offer advice, then issue warnings if necessary, and involve parents if the problem persists. Together with parents, we develop strategies for improvement and increased classroom engagement (S-1-4).

The above interview result highlights that secondary school teachers adhere to a code of conduct regarding student discipline, which provides guidelines for implementing various measures, such as involving parents, to address disciplinary issues. These strategies assist teachers in managing the ethical challenges they face in relation to disciplinary matters.

Open Discussion and Confrontation

Most of the participants replied that they use open discussion when it comes to students and the administration of ethical issues. They argue that it is easy to discuss the issues openly within academic or administrative staff. However, things may get challenging when the argument is with students. For example, one of the participants (S-2-2) said, “It is frustrating to enter into unnecessary arguments with students. Upon the worst scenario of shouting and insulting, we consider escalating the matter to the school management. The situation can lead to the compromise of teachers’ emotional intelligence”. Another participant (S-1-3) added, “I will approach the students and talk to them. If I can solve the problem at my level, I will deal with it by myself. But, if it is beyond my limit, I will refer it to higher management and consult about the case.”

Understanding Causal Factors

Knowing the fact that some of the students in secondary schools come from a family background with low economic status puts teachers under pressure and different emotional states, and this in turn exacerbates the issue of ethical dilemmas. For instance, one of the participants (S-1-2) shared the following story. “Most students are engaged in labor works to support their family. Some of the students sleep during class because they have been working during the entire night. Some of the students might not have anything to eat therefore they become tired and sleepy during class hours”.

In relation to the finding, another female participant (S-2-2) explained that she gets so emotional by the situation then she tries to take time to listen and understand the root causes of being unethical or for not following school activities properly among students. She specifically said,

First, I will find myself in a state of being emotional when I face challenges related to students’ ethics, but later on I ask them to tell me honestly about their personal life. If they tell me openly, I will immediately change my decision. When students are involved in unwanted behaviors, the consequences are not good for students because they will receive serious penalties, like being expelled from school or not allowed to take exams. Considering that students originate from diverse backgrounds, my

decision-making process adapts once I understand the genuine reasons behind their failure to complete assignments, especially if this occurs repeatedly (S-2-2).

In addition to economic challenges or being economically disadvantaged, parents or family members may be faced with both visible and invisible disabilities. For instance, parents or family members of the students may be found at older age and this circumstance may interfere with teachers' decision making. The other reason that is mentioned as a cause is the biological (hormonal) change of students due to their puberty or adolescent stage. For instance, one of the participants (S-2-2) explained, "There are 50- 60 students in every class. They are a teenage group. Instead of thinking, analyzing, or providing attention, they depend on emotion; the sexual characteristics and hormone led issues are my reason to decline my first decision. There may be a tendency to say don't come into my class, but I'll leave that decision and may allow them to come in".

Being Ethical

Being ethical means working with students, teachers, parents and professionals in a cooperative way. One of the participants (S-2-1) responded, "My work is teaching students properly and being present in class properly. Therefore, I have to do this in a cooperative manner. I need to enter class with a proper attitude". The same participant explained that being cooperative refers to giving of self-right to others; or you may be considered as "selfish". This more refers to being submissive in order to solve issues among teachers. This creates a dilemma between saying "I have a right to say no" or "doing what the school sets as roles". In this scenario, this participant replied, "I will be cooperative enough to solve the problem though the decision could put me in ethical dilemmas". Specifically, it was mentioned, "My role may be teaching grade 12 students. However, one of my colleagues may ask me to teach at grade 11 because he wants to teach at grade 12, for the schedule for grade 12 completes early compared to others grades". Another participant mentioned the following regarding the collaborative step that teachers take during the decision of students' cases.

The behaviors like insulting teachers and physical assault of girl students are managed by following steps to be taken to come to the final decision, such as oral warning, written warning, engaging and talking to their parents and finally expelling the student. However, in some cases the final decision needs to be changed based on the degree of the misconduct, assessment of consequences, and some quarreling rules of the school in the name of supporting students. In addition, students may ask apologies while teachers are about to decide to pass punishment (S-1-1).

In attempt to work with professionals, one of participants specifically said, In instances of repeated misconduct, I typically direct students to guidance and counseling services to help them realign their behavior. For example, students who violate the school's dress code, such as wearing earrings for boys or having improper haircuts, are referred for follow-up. The duration of support varies; some may need long-term assistance while others require short-term intervention. Upon completion of counseling, we assign them responsibilities within the school, such as class

representatives or leaders of various clubs, to foster accountability and serve as positive examples for their peers. This approach emphasizes empowerment and accountability rather than solely relying on disciplinary measures (S-1-1).

From the preceding statements, it can be inferred that despite facing challenges within the school environment, secondary school teachers consistently strive to address ethical challenges by demonstrating ethical behavior, maintaining an open-minded approach, and fostering collaboration.

Discussion

There are so many issues among secondary school teachers that can put them at critical stage of dilemma. One of the main ethical dilemmas that is derived as theme in the present study was ‘not governed by schools’ rules and regulations’. This finding is attached to the relationship with students. Teaching is a profession that mainly involves relationship with students (Ehrich et al., 2011; Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011). In the judgment process, teachers face dilemma when they know students are not following school rules and regulations. They can’t skip their moral agent to see everyone as school community adheres to school rules. This will put them on ethical dilemma and in turn may affect their everyday work. In support of this, Helton and Ray (2005) found that ethical dilemmas experienced by teachers arise from action of students such as, not giving care for ethics and behavioral issues.

In related study, Cranston et al. (2006) interviewed school leaders and found that ethical dilemmas faced by group of educational leaders are focused on student and staff issues. In this similar study, student misbehavior was one of the key findings of ethical dilemmas which involves students and this is consistent with the present study. Moreover, Shapira-Lishchinsky (2011) identified clashing with rules, standards, or norms in school as one of ethical incidents at schools. However, Shapira-Lishchinsky (2011) found that the most frequently discussed critical incidences among school teachers was caring climate versus formal climate. This means that student-teacher relationship whereby the teacher’s dilemma lies in choosing between caring for students versus obeying school rules. Specifically, the weight for being flexible (e.g. allowing students to do test at a later date) is greater than from the weight of following school rules (e.g. following school schedule for test date) during the ethical decision process.

Another theme that was linked to relationship concern was lack of acceptance and recognition among school community. This emergence signifies that relation with administrators and other colleagues can also be a source of ethical dilemmas. Ehrich et al. (2011) indicated that the expectation of supervisors among teachers may be a casual factor for feelings that lead to ethical dilemmas particularly when the orders from supervisors were in conflict with teachers’ professional values. Furthermore, Helton and Ray (2005) found that administrative decisions conflicting with personal or professional ethics are the sources for ethical dilemmas for teachers in schools and universities.

Working with others has elements of conflict by its nature. The one reason for relationship conflict is power differential. This refers to the belief that one person has more power over the other and attempts to use the power in a threatening way instead of sharing the power. Gibson et al. (2014) addressed the topic of power differential from the angle of professional ethics. The research helps to understand the unique effects of power on the ethical dilemmas faced by academics. They noted that power has the potential to influence or bias people that possess it and to be used to negative and positive ends. Power differentials are viewed as more of a concern from the view of a subordinate or dependent stance as compared to the person with power or authority figure. This view of power differential is common in school settings where the relationship between supervisors and teachers are ordered in a hierarchical fashion. The clear structure and role boundaries in the institution like schools may serve as a source of refusing to use power among different parties. Therefore, open discussion and some level of training is needed for those in a position of authority like school directors or supervisors and for those in a position of subordinate like school teachers in supporting them to handle ethical dilemmas involving those with more power (Campbell, 1997; Gibson et al., 2014).

The emotional consequences have been studied in the ethics of teaching profession. For instance, Shapira-Lishchinsky (2011) investigated the emotional responses of ethical dilemmas in critical incidents among secondary school teachers in 50 Israeli schools. The study concluded that most teachers experienced unpleasant feeling due to critical stages of ethical dilemmas they had faced at schools, and they preferred to hide those emotions. The current study also affirms that incidents of ethical challenges can lead to the emotional pain and guilt. Being unable to be honest to the roles and responsibilities that are attached to teachers and administrative staff in school leads to moral questions and put someone in a position of “I am doing it right?” or “Am I doing what is best for my organization or students? Answering those questions leads to emotional dilemmas and in turn affects emotions of the person (Corey et al., 2015; Ehrich et al., 2011). Consistent with previous local studies, the present study affirms that economic challenges make teachers not be honest to the position they have. For instance, Ayenalem et al. (2023) found that secondary school teachers have faced chronic economic challenges and they usually fight for survival, and this all forces teachers not to focus on their main responsibilities. Furthermore, Shishigu (2015) reported that all of the teacher participants have shown a desire to change their profession due to the low wage they receive as teaching professionals. The poor living conditions of students and stories that are attached to students and their families can also be taken as pushing factors for getting those teachers in emotional links of ethical dilemmas.

The present study explicitly has shown that political interference was one of the main causal factors for ethical dilemma. Teachers’ freedom to make an independent decision seemed to be dominated by the school political climate. One of the key factors for school teachers to discharge their responsibilities in the appropriate manner is the presence of a conducive school environment that supports teachers to make autonomous decisions within the scope of their mandate. Thus, absence of protection of teachers’ autonomy in their professional roles could potentially affect teachers’ satisfaction and in turn impact the outcomes of services (Nayak, & Padhi, 2022). Nevertheless, in the present study, teachers

strive to make complex decisions in the best interests of their students by understanding the causal factors, respecting the code of conduct of students' discipline, conducting open discussions, and being collaborative with each other.

Conclusion and Implications

Conclusion

The concept of ethical dilemmas has not been well explored in the teaching profession and among secondary school teachers in the context of Ethiopia. The present study confirmed that secondary school teachers faced economic, political, structural, emotional and disciplinary dilemmas. Regarding ways of approaches for solving ethical dilemmas, secondary school teachers employed a variety of modalities including, respecting the code of conduct of students' discipline, open discussion, considering personal causal factors, and being cooperative enough. There is little guidance in the literature to help Ethiopian secondary school teachers in ways of resolving ethical challenges in school settings. Most of the participants confirmed that they did not get any training on ethical issues except the fact that few participants had training in relation to student disciplines and how they can approach students concern. Therefore, the following elements have been forwarded for better practices of the teaching profession in Ethiopian secondary schools.

Implications

The Need to Develop Standardized Code of Ethics

Teachers need to be always ready to face ethical dilemmas in every part of their work. Even if code of ethics can't be complete by themselves in handling critical incidents at school, they can provide a better guidance in a situation where awareness and practice about ethical decision-making process is low. Out of the numbers of models for ethical decision-making process, teachers can deal ethical dilemmas at least with the known five bedrock principles of autonomy, beneficence, justice, doing no harm, and being faithful.

The Need to Develop Guiding Books

As there are no clear-cut solutions for those ethical dilemmas of what secondary school teachers have faced, there is a need to develop guiding books that are equipped with practical cases of ethical dilemmas in school settings, the approaches that were used to solve, and additional commentaries and questions. This can be done by collection of different ethical scenarios from secondary school teachers so that those practical challenges can be shared with teachers. This would help in turn to see things critically and in different lenses for those teachers during their practice.

The Need for Professional Development Programs and Continuous Support

The teaching profession is one of the emerging fields to show changes in every aspect of development. It has its own opportunities, such as connecting with students, staffs and

parents, and it has also its own challenges in relation to ethical decision. There is a need to think of using those opportunities and challenges as a chance to empower secondary school teachers for making them better professions in the field. For instance, in the form of professional development plan and continuous support, it is possible to arrange open discussion forums among different parties including, teachers, parents, supervisors, community leaders, and students. Bringing of different parties for open dialogue will enhance level of awareness and understanding about responsible and professional behavior.

In addition, as part of professional development plan, it is also possible to enable secondary school teachers to reflect on difficult situations from a variety of perspectives and to be reflective about themselves. It is apparent that every person has her/his own biases and prejudices. This can be resolved by providing the necessary training and by making teachers society reflective persons. This process will give teachers a chance of acquiring additional skills and different unbiased ways of looking for the challenges that they encounter in day-to-day school environments.

The Importance of Multicultural Education

One of the ethical incidents emerged from the findings of the study was the existence of political scenarios in the school environment. Ethiopia is a country of pluralistic and diversified societies. Issues related to everyday life and work environment can easily link to politics as the country is on transition from the model of politics that magnifies difference to a political arena that works for unity. With this context, school teachers cannot be free from advocating their political opinion. The present investigator is highly recommending the need to ethics and multicultural education to resolve political issues at schools. This is also recommended by Gluchmanova (2015) who said that multicultural education provides a fundamental education with the purpose of eliminating discrimination because of ethnic origin and background. Dialogue on cultural differences and the respect of human dignity has impact on changing people's bias and subjectivity. And this can help them to react properly when they come across complex issues of identity and diversity. Thus, schools need to promote diversity and inter-cultural understanding as positive learning experiences.

Limitations and Future Study

In the present study, the participant pool was limited, comprising data from just two public secondary schools. To enhance the generalizability of the findings, future research could exert greater effort to expand the participant base by gathering data from a more extensive array of public schools. Moreover, the study solely employed semi-structured in-depth interviews (IDIs). Therefore, future investigations might consider supplementing data collection methods with additional approaches like focus group discussions and document reviews to strengthen the credibility and reliability of the findings.

Despite these limitations, the study has focused on exploring the ethical dilemmas and ways to resolve them. This may serve as an input to develop a model for ethical decision-making process for teachers. However, future studies might be conducted by exploring ethical dilemmas on the other levels of the education sector, such as elementary schools and

college communities and can also focus on exploring additional push factors by considering different dimensions of forces such as variables related to individuals, groups, organizations, and extraneous ones because ethical dilemmas can occur when there is conflict of interest with in individual, group and organizational interests. This gives a chance to develop multifaceted model of ethical dilemmas.

Although the present study may provide some better understanding of the types of ways teachers understand power relationships in ethical decision situations, more work needs to be done.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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